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PREPARATION FOR ASSIGNMENT OF COMPOSITION SUBJECTS

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Charles Lamb said a hundred years ago, "The modern schoolmaster is expected to know a little of everything, because his pupil is required not to be entirely ignorant of anything. He must be superficially, if I may so say, omniscient." Some of us present-day modern schoolmasters and schoolmistresses are inclined to resent the fact that we must know and teach a little of everything. We want to specialize and teach one thing "thoroughly," be an authority on one subject to our pupils, and discard all that does not belong strictly to our department, turning it over to its proper place with the assurance that we know nothing about that subject. Certainly specialization is absolutely necessary for departmental work in our high schools; but I believe there is a division of the English course that, though it does belong specially to English, yet carries over this subject into every other department—that is, composition.

When Lamb wrote his delightful essay on the schoolmaster, there was no such thing in English-speaking schools as the systematic teaching of English. If it was taught at all, it was a case of "nobody's business." As we know, it is only in the last few years that English has been given rank in the school curriculum with Latin, mathematics, etc., and this definite training been demanded of the teacher of English. It is not surprising, then, that the last syllabus has not been made for the English course nor the last word said as to the training of the teacher for this subject. Lamb must have written the words just quoted as a prophecy of the ideal teacher being evolved by our present-day demands under the guidance of our Council, and I beg, in making my explanation of the statement, to retain his word "superficially," and to apply it to the preparation of the teacher for assigning to pupils subjects on which to speak or write.

Undoubtedly the training of a teacher of English should be thorough and systematic, establishing the principles of grammar, rhetoric, and literature. In these divisions of the subject English stands as one of the other courses in the school, and is taught on the same basis. But it is only as far as these divisions of the subject are concerned that English is a departmental study. In its composition-phase, whether oral or written, it is not confined to four walls, and should not be held there. Composition—that is the practice of the principles of grammar, rhetoric, and literature—is the factor that unifies the departments of the school; the link that connects school life with home life; the means we may employ to attach to the consciousness of every pupil the fact that he is a member of an organized community of active men and women. To be sure, this is great work for the composition, and it can become this cementing factor only as classes of subjects are arranged that include the pupil's natural interests, which are his school, his home, his community. To arrange subjects on this threefold basis is not so onerous; the difficulty lies in the fact that the teacher is prepared on literary subjects only and also in the fact that we do not agree that the matter of selecting subjects is the point where great waste occurs—waste of time, energy, nervous force—and is therefore the point where conservation must begin. It is just here that Lamb's word is useful, where he would perhaps suggest to the colleges and teachers to do some more superficial training.

I have found by an experience I had five or six years ago that a little learning is not a dangerous thing if it is used to arouse and inspire pupils to desire research. "Desire research!" Yes, to go to encyclopedias, government leaflets, library books, with the goad of interest. That is where I noticed my first gain. In a list of subjects furnished by the text was one on "Pottery-making." The best I did with it was dreary demanding from the pupils hours of reading on the subject and from myself blue erasures with the frequent comment "bookish." Therefore, before the next class could attack the subject, I had prepared for a different exercise; I had spent a number of days during the intervening summer in a potter's shop and learned the principles of pottery-

making by actually doing the work. The time spent could furnish me with but superficial knowledge but it served my purpose well, not for one year only, but for every year since. With several of my vases and jars set about the room and a piece of potter's clay, I began the lesson to my tenth-grade pupils. I showed the methods, and explained the firing process by drawings. Almost immediately a natural oral composition exercise was furnished by several who had visited pottery works. I gave them the bibliography available, and they used it with awakened interest. A number of them wanted to take lessons in the art; some of them have managed since to do so.

The interest being aroused in the class, the pupils were ready to write on phases of the subject. I "broke up" the large subject and suggested that each write a short theme on some phase of pottery-making, a description of a piece; a story that dealt with a potter or a vase or jar; an explanation of one of the methods of making pottery; a retelling of Longfellow's poem; a description of Egyptian pottery; Silas Marner's broken jug.

It was through the aroused interest of one of the pupils that we next studied the different kinds of china, making a visit to our largest china shop for the purpose and arranging with the proprietor to hear a talk on the different patterns, etc.

From this beginning I have taken other subjects, dead in themselves, and, showing that I knew something about them, have aroused and broadened the interest of the pupils. My training on *Silas Marner* (for instance) was such that when I assigned subjects from it I had aroused the pupils' interest so that they could take hold of the work for themselves; why should I not prepare as carefully on subjects that have to do with other interests? Eventually I worked out a system that includes their "college-entrance requirement" subjects, their home and community interests, and correlation with the other departments and other interests of the school.

How many English teachers understand basketry or bread-making, gardening or millinery? Yet a few lessons in each would furnish a valuable basis for arousing interest. A month spent on a farm helping to attend to the chickens and butter would give an

experience that could not fail of being useful, The process of rug-weaving or lace-making may be given to pupils, not for them to return as enlarged notes, but to furnish them facts and to form interests about which they may make descriptions and narrations. Many of us are not in intelligent and sympathetic touch with the other departments of the school, yet oral and written work is constantly going on in all of them, and if we understood the principles of manual training or domestic science, and the required exercises in Latin and French, we could save time and energy by doing English composition work directly with these departments. We may say that it is just as much the work of the other departments to be in active touch with the English. But oral and written work is a division of the subject of English, and so it is our business to push it as a unifying and conserving factor.

To prepare to do this, a course in English theme subjects might be arranged that would give the normal student instruction in the various arts, industries, sciences, professions, besides, of course, in literature. If this could be done in colleges, teachers would go to their work prepared on a phase of English—that of assignment of subjects—that many have felt unprepared to handle with definiteness and system—and all because they have not received training that is “superficially omniscient.”